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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6259
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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RHMFISS/EUCOM POLAD VAIHINGEN GE PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 000920

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/08/2023

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [ECON](#) [TU](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: TURKEY: SOUTHEAST CONTACTS HOPEFUL ON GOT-IRAQ
CONTACTS; PESSIMISTIC ON DOMESTIC POLITICS

Classified By: PolCouns Janice G Weiner, reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

[1](#)1. (U) This is a joint Consulate Adana-Embassy Ankara message.

[1](#)2. (C) Summary and Comment: Kurdish leaders in Turkey's southeast are pleased that Ankara has initiated formal contacts with northern Iraq's Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), reflecting a more pragmatic Turkish approach to the region and a validation of the multicultural, decentralized model emerging in Iraq. Despite progress on the diplomatic front, the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) appeal in the southeast is waning. Many Kurds believe PM Erdogan is relying on military solutions and resisting reform on cultural and linguistic rights. As a result, some religious Kurds are exploring options outside of the AKP, with attention focused on followers of Fetullah Gulen, whose movement has growing influence in the region.

[1](#)3. (C) The change in Kurdish attitudes over the last year is striking: Kurdish leaders in the southeast rushed to defend the AKP and Erdogan against encroachments by the military (the "e-memorandum" warning the government to refrain from electing Gul president) because of their faith in the AKP's democratization agenda and its forward-leaning posture towards the Kurdish issue. Now, while no one advocates the AKP's closure, Kurds regard Erdogan as wavering on democratic reform and having given a green light to a sustained military offensive against the PKK. The political fragmentation in the Kurdish community and the PKK's continued violence are equally -- if not more -- destructive to Kurdish aspirations than to government policies.

[1](#)4. (U) Adana PO and Ankara PolCouns met with a range of contacts during a three-day trip to Diyarbakir, Mardin and Urfa May 5-7.

GOT-KRG: Finally Talking

[1](#)5. (C) Diyarbakir Mayor Osman Baydemir welcomed the initiation of formal contacts between the GOT and the KRG, noting Turkey's ambitions to play a constructive role in Iraq and elsewhere in the Middle East require it to formally recognize the Kurdish government in northern Iraq. He was pleased that the meeting, when it finally happened, produced scarcely any reaction from the Turkish establishment, which has opposed any contact with the KRG since the beginning of

the Iraq war. Baydemir added that for the dialogue with the KRG to be effective, the Turkish side should include representatives from its own Kurdish community (i.e., the Democratic Society Party - DTP), though he acknowledged the GOT would not feel comfortable taking such a step anytime soon.

¶6. (C) DTP officials are continuing to develop their contacts in northern Iraq (DTP chairman Ahmet Turk visited the region May 7) and Diyarbakir plans to host a regional municipal fair that will include representatives from cities in Iraq and Syria. Baydemir said he was profoundly affected by his own visit to northern Iraq earlier this year. The KRG parliament is truly multicultural, with over 10 different groups and sects participating. During the session he witnessed, a Turkoman was addressing the body in Turkish while the speaker translated his words into Kurdish. Baydemir remarked that this is a great model for the rest of the region.

¶7. (C) One potential irritant in the GOT-KRG rapprochement is a legal case against three children indicted for singing the KRG anthem at a choir festival in San Francisco (reftel). The children's lawyer told us that, aside from the silliness of prosecuting children, he envisioned another problematic angle: the KRG could react strongly if his clients are convicted. Baydemir remarked that in northern Iraq, "people's attitude towards Turkey is determined by the GOT's attitude towards its Kurds."

The AKP and the Kurds: the Magic is Gone

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¶8. (C) A local journalist, Altan Tan, argued that no political party accurately reflects the majority of Kurds, who are religious, have a strong sense of ethnic identity and want to live prosperously. The PKK/DTP defends the Kurds' ethnic interests, but do not appeal to their religious sentiments. The AKP is in synch with their conservative religious values, but despite democratic rhetoric, has ignored their aspirations for greater recognition of Kurdish ethnic identity. Tan said the AKP, had it followed through on promises to address the political side of the Kurdish issue, could have become dominant in the region, won up to 70% of the votes and secured the mayoralty of Diyarbakir, a huge symbolic prize. But the Kurds are politically astute, with limited tolerance for those who do not keep their word and appear incompetent.

¶9. (C) Baydemir complained the state is fundamentally out of step with people in the region, citing as an example one of the many lawsuits against him. The public prosecutor (with the concurrence of the Minister of Interior) indicted him for his calming remarks (in Kurdish) which helped defuse rioting in Diyarbakir in March 2006. Baydemir noted that people in neighborhoods most affected by that violence still thank him for his efforts, which they believe saved many lives. "So the people are thanking me and the State is punishing me. They see the same set of facts completely differently."

¶10. (C) Even AKP sympathizers, including business leader Mucahit Can (who ran for Diyarbakir mayor on the AKP ticket in 2004), faulted Erdogan for failing to deliver on commitments to the Kurds. In recent months, the government has discussed modest reforms such as launching Kurdish broadcasts on state television. Erdogan, though, has adopted an uncompromising nationalist line and has continued to refuse to meet with DTP deputies. Erdogan's brusque style, on display in some recent shouting matches with Kurdish NGO leaders, has further hurt the AKP's ratings in the region. Can noted that, in a 2004 televised mayoral debate with Baydemir, the relatively inexperienced Baydemir had kept his cool, while Can, emphasizing his close ties to the community and direct contributions as a business leader, had not. In retrospect, Can recognized that strident approach had not

helped him; indeed, when he viewed the tape, he agreed Baydemir had bested him. The PM, he concluded, had yet to internalize that lesson.

¶11. (C) Perhaps the biggest reason for disillusionment with the government is the continuing military offensive against the PKK, which climaxed with a ground operation in February. Baydemir said that people on the street blame Erdogan for the intensification of military activities. "There are 5,000 fighters in the mountains and the question is how to bring them home. If bombing them worked, this would have been finished 20 years ago. This approach weakens those who want a peaceful solution." Others agreed. We urged Baydemir and DTP in general to contribute to a solution by unequivocally condemning violence across the board.

¶12. (C) There is consensus in the region that the military operations and Erdogan's apparent about-face on Kurdish issues has allowed the PKK -- as well as the DTP -- to reclaim victim status. Even the closure case against the AKP has won it little sympathy. Tan said people believe the AKP is trying to accommodate the Turkish establishment rather than fight against it. As a result, they are now seen as "cowards" or turncoats rather than victims. Should AKP suddenly come through on all they have promised in the past, however, that could change.

Ozal's Shadow

¶13. (C) During a Diyarbakir visit six weeks ago, our contacts suggested that Iraqi President Talabani's Ankara visit and quiet contacts between the DTP and the GOT could produce a dialogue leading to a cease-fire and a laying down of arms. Now they see little sign of meaningful dialogue, in part because the PKK is not following a coherent strategy. According to Tan, its leadership is increasingly divided over

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what direction to go. As a result, Kurdish leaders and analysts are looking exclusively to the GOT to change the context.

¶14. (C) Three of our contacts independently referred to the late President Turgut Ozal's efforts in the early 1990s as a model for what is needed now. They saw him, at least in hindsight, as having reached out to all parties to the conflict in search of a solution, as well as having recognized all dimensions of the Kurdish problem. Tan claimed that President Gul has a liberal, constructive approach to the Kurdish issue and would like to emulate Ozal, rumored to have been on the verge of a breakthrough in the region prior to his death. Tan claimed PM Erdogan is blocking Gul from following this path. Erdogan, Tan said, buys in to the traditional Turkish paranoia that an autonomous or independent Kurdish entity in northern Iraq will spark separatism among Turkey's Kurds. He is thus scared to take any bold steps on the issue. Baydemir praised Ozal's courage, but said he was doubtful whether Gul or any other Turkish leader could live up to Ozal's lionized example. Can also urged today's leaders to study Ozal's example on the Kurdish issue, noting that simply following the path Ozal pioneered would be a huge step forward, would require no creativity and would be seen as legitimate.

Ferment Among Kurdish Islamists

¶15. (C) Tan and Sanliurfa attorney Seyhmus Ulek believe other dynamics are at play besides a simple shift away from the AKP to the DTP. They said Kurdish Islamists have traditionally been apolitical or aligned themselves with mainstream Turkish Islamist parties such as Refah or, more recently, AKP. (A minority fringe eschewed democratic politics and joined violent movements in the 1990s, such as Turkish Hizbullah.) Widespread disillusionment with the AKP has also affected

Islamists, many of whom are now putting a heavier accent on Kurdish national aspirations. They point out that since many Islamists simultaneously identify themselves as Turkish nationalists, they should be able to cultivate a similar dual identity as Kurdish nationalist Islamists.

¶16. (C) Followers of Fetullah Gulen, according to Tan, are the one quasi-political force with the potential to take advantage of this shift. Recently, the Gulenists have changed their view on the Kurdish issue from a posture that basically saw the Kurdish issue as one of economic underdevelopment (echoing the Turkish state's nationalist sensibilities) to an approach that sympathizes with the Kurds' demands for expanded language rights and education in their mother tongue. (Another point of sympathy is the fact that Gulen's ideology is also grounded in the teachings of Said Nursi, a Kurdish scholar who died in 1960.) One sign of the Gulenists' evolution is an intense focus on northern Iraq, where the movement has opened eight high schools and is in the process of establishing a university. Ulek, for his part, believes Kurdish Gulenists remain faithful to the AKP and are working to prevent centrifugal forces from splitting Kurds away from the ruling party and further splintering the national polity.

¶17. (C) If a political vehicle emerged to express the nascent Gulenist approach in the southeast, it could prove influential, Ulek said, though the combination of religious piety and Kurdish nationalism, however mild, would undoubtedly result in legal problems. Meanwhile, he noted that the PKK, fearing leakage of support, is now claiming Kurdish religious groups are bent on forming a "Kurdish Hamas."

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